

BY ANNE BRANIGIN

Apologizing for the echoes of a tantrum in the background. Trying to negotiate deadlines with bath time. Taking a work call while anxiously eyeing a baby monitor.

A year into the coronavirus pandemic, this feels routine even as it has upended life for many parents. They're the lucky ones: the parents who have been able to keep a job, work from home and find, however tenuous, some sort of patchwork solution to child care.

Many others are not so fortunate.

No better number illustrates this than the current unemployment figures. More than 4 million people have left the workforce since last year, most of them women. Some of the industries hit hardest by the pandemic, such as retail and hospitality, employ a disproportionate share of female workers. But other women are being driven out of their jobs to take care of their children.

The United States has put in place temporary universal child-care programs before, and came close to making it the law of the land in the 1970s. Now the idea is gaining ground again. Republicans and Democrats have more in common on child care than most other issues, and the pandemic has spurred them to stabilize the child-care sector.

President Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package includes emergency funding for the child-care industry, as well as money to subsidize child care.

In a Wednesday hearing in Washington, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome H. Powell raised the issue of affordable child care, questioning whether the United States' complacency has put the economy behind.

"I will say, many other countries, our peers, our competitors, advanced democracy economies have a more built-up function for child care and they wind up having substantially higher labor force participation among women," Powell said. "We used to lead the world in female labor force participation a quarter-century ago, and we no longer do — and it may just be that those policies have put us behind."

Policy advocates see this moment of crisis as a prime opportunity to fix child care, when so many Americans have been forced to recognize its role in the economy, said Julie Kashen, director for women's economic justice at the Century Foundation, a liberal think tank.

It's "the invisible work that makes all other work possible," Kashen said.

"We build infrastructure like roads and bridges and communications systems so that people can work," Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) said at the Democratic National Convention last summer, when she made the case for taking a different approach to child care. "It's time to recognize that child care is part of the basic infrastructure of this nation. It's infrastructure for families."

Policy advocates argue that treating child care as infrastructure would have a twofold benefit to the economy: Not only would it allow parents to continue working, it has the potential to create new employment opportunities and convert hundreds of thousands of existing roles into "good jobs" — offering benefits, protections and high enough wages to support a family.

In crisis, experts see opportunity to fix child care and boost the economy

Infrastructure would benefit kids, keep parents working and foster new, better jobs, advocates say



JAH CHIKWENDU/THE WASHINGTON POST

Sunshine Early Learning Center operates in the District's Washington Highlands neighborhood. Of more than 4 million people who have left the workforce since the pandemic began, most are women. The crisis has revealed how critical child care is to the economy.

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Even pre-pandemic, many parents were priced out of the options that did exist in their communities.

One 2017 survey found parents paying \$9,000 to \$9,600, on average, for a year of day care for one child (in big cities, like New York or Washington, the cost is much higher). At the same time, almost half of American workers were toiling in low-wage jobs.

Nina Perez, the national campaign director for early childhood at the advocacy group MomsRising, pointed out that even before coronavirus closures, the high cost of child care was driving mothers to leave their jobs and stay home.

"It was not uncommon for us to get stories that child-care costs were as much as someone's mortgage," Perez said. "Those stories existed before the pandemic."

Without government subsidies, it is hard to bring down the cost of care, Kashen said. There must be adequate staff, especially for young children, who need constant care. Facilities must have appropriate staffing, be safe, and provide a healthy and nurturing environment.

"There's no efficiencies. There's no economies of scale in child care. You can't automate it," Kashen said.

Day-care operators have razor-thin profit margins that come at the expense of low-paid child-care workers, who are primarily women of color. For these businesses, taking even a handful of children out of a program can push them into the red.

Katie Hamm, an executive at the Center for American Progress, who has co-authored several

reports on U.S. child-care deserts, points out that excluding child care from conversations about infrastructure is a "very gendered approach" and effectively shuts out women of color from earning decent wages and being able to support their own families.

When the child-care industry crumbled last year, it primarily affected Asian, Latina and Black women, who make up about 42 percent of all U.S. child-care workers, according to the Department of Labor (women make up 95 percent of all child-care providers in the country). In 2019, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the median hourly wage for these workers was \$11.65, including those who work in elementary and secondary schools.

They also rarely receive benefits like health insurance or pensions, Hamm said, and have a harder time making ends meet than workers in other industries.

This left them especially vulnerable once the pandemic hit and the nation's child-care system collapsed. If the Biden administration truly aims to rebuild the U.S. economy and improve working conditions, Ai-jen Poo, executive director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, says a key part of that will be turning child-care jobs into good jobs.

That means major government investment in the child-care industry so these businesses can be profitable, pay higher wages, develop career pathways, and provide benefits and workplace protections, like unions.

This last point is crucial, said author and educator Tamara Mose. For her book "Raising

Brooklyn," Mose spent three years with Caribbean child-care workers in the New York City borough.

"There needs to be a formally recognized occupational title," said Mose. Right now, terms such as "maid," "nanny" and "babysitter" all stand in for similar types of domestic and care work, which makes imposing standards and regulation for this labor difficult.

And, just as with other infrastructure jobs, like construction and engineering, there needs to be a guard against the precariousness of the work, and a structure to allow providers to determine their work conditions, she says.

"The only way, truly, to do that is to unionize," Mose said.

Poo compared this to government investment in and regulation of manufacturing jobs in the 1920s and 1930s. "[Child-care] jobs can't be automated, and they won't be outsourced. They're by definition the kind of in-person, service-driven professions that we need," she said. "So we have an imperative already to figure out how we turn them from unsustainable, poverty-wage jobs to jobs that actually do secure and enable economic mobility for the people who do them."

Experts agree that the place to start is infant care and early-learning programs. Once a child turns 5, schools take on a major share of the work in caring for children. Those same structures simply doesn't exist for infants and younger children.

Infant and toddler care is the most expensive kind of care because states require a low child-to-adult ratio.

Because of that, the sector em-

plows the most low-wage workers; if these providers were paid according to their skill set, a year of day care would not cost less than \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year, Hamm said.

A nationally subsidized program could make quality care affordable for parents while substantially raising wages for hundreds of thousands more women.

Hamm noted that unlike for older learners, this important period is widely considered a parent's personal responsibility, not a societal one.

"We have this kind of accepted contract, I guess, that when a child turns 5, all of a sudden they're learning and therefore it's a public good and every child should have access to it. But there's nothing magical that happens on a child's birthday that makes them start learning," Hamm said.

Perez, of MomsRising, echoed the importance of these programs.

"Some of the most rapid, rapid brain development happens in those first years. Yet it's where we've put in some of the least amount of resources," Perez said.

Americans don't save money by skipping on these programs either, she added, noting one oft-repeated statistic: Every dollar spent on early-childhood programs yields much more money (\$4 to \$12) in return. Multiple studies have found that early-childhood education programs increase a child's likelihood of staying in school, graduating and avoiding incarceration.

"From a citizen perspective, from an economic perspective, we're all impacted by these things," Perez said.

It can also advance gender parity, both in the workforce and in the home, said sociologist Caitlyn Collins, an assistant professor at Washington University in St. Louis. In her work, Collins has compared America's approach to child care with that of its Western, industrialized peer countries, most of which have some version of nationalized care.

"Without a national child-care system, women will never be able to freely choose their own paths when it comes to work and family, because their hand is being forced," Collins said.

This is the point experts returned to: Healthy, safe and cared-for children aren't just good for working moms or the economy; they're good for society.

Hamm, Perez and Kashen all brought up the Child Care for Working Families Act, sponsored by Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (D-Va.), which would address many of these concerns by focusing on the needs of providers, families and children. The package would support universal access to high-quality early-education programs, cap the amount working-class families pay out of pocket for child care, boost wages and training for providers, and make day-care centers more inclusive for children with disabilities.

But we shouldn't stop there, Poo said.

"If we take a piecemeal, siloed and incremental approach to addressing this moment and the pain that families are feeling, we will fail," she said. "The cost of doing too little right now is far greater, exponentially greater than doing too much."

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